

FOREWORD

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Interview with Ambassador Bohlen

21 May 1964

Schlesinger: ... you first knew John Kennedy back in Moscow,
when was it - '38 or '39?

Bohlen: I first met John Kennedy in Moscow in either '38 or '39, I'm not quite sure which year. His father was Ambassador to Great Britain at that time and he had just come in to Moscow on a visit. We saw a bit of him there - had him to lunch and other meals and I remember very well how impressed we were with his charm and his intelligence. I can't say that beyond that there were any definite impressions except that he was an extremely personable, attractive, and bright young man. I didn't really get to know Kennedy until after he became President. I met him one or two times in Washington and I remember one occasion in the winter of 1960 at a dinner at Joe Alsop's at which Hugh Gaitskell, the British Labor Leader, was present, Joe, of course, Dean Acheson, Stewart Alsop, Al Friendly, Senator Kennedy, Senator Fulbright, and myself. The evening did not produce anything from Senator Kennedy who had enough sense to keep his mouth shut while a fight was going on between Dean Acheson, Gaitskell, aided and abetted by Joe Alsop. But I was impressed then with the extraordinary self-control that he displayed in keeping his mouth shut while this was going on. Then I really came to know Kennedy after he became President and I remember him in the early days of his Administration coming over to the Department of State and speaking to the members of the

have bound him to accept U. S. advice on certain political
matters. In fact, in the nuclear field, it is rather
difficult to accept assistance from a country without to some
extent becoming dependent on it for the continuance of the
supplies. For a moment now, to leave the subject of France and
to turn to the final denouement with Cuba and the Soviet Union
which certainly, I think, will go down in history as the greatest
moment of his administration. This was a very curious matter
because I had an appointment to see the President on Tuesday,
October 14, to say goodbye to him before going over to France.
We didn't mention the word "France" once during the interview
because he had just that morning received the CIA overflight
intelligence report showing that the Russians were engaged in
installing medium range missiles in Cuba. We had quite a
discussion on this subject and there seemed to be no doubt in
his mind, and certainly none in mine, that the United States
would have to get these bases eliminated, the only question was
how it was to be done. I saw him that night at dinner at Joe
Alsop's and while this was still top secret the President, after
dinner, took me out on the porch to discuss further the Cuban
matter and as to the various modalities of how you could do this
and, of course, there were an infinite number of combinations that
could be worked out for the American action. During that evening
he told me he thought it would be a mistake for me to go to
Paris; that I should remain in Washington. I told him I would
do whatever he wanted me to and would see what could be done to
provide the necessary cover story.

Was there any indication that night as to how his thinking was running?

I wouldn't say no - I think he just hit the subject and was exploring down the different days whether or not it would be an approach to Castro or an approach to Khruschev - I remember his bringing up that question and the question of the time element - how far along these constructions had gone, how quickly he would have to move, and the various types of international complications that were involved. The next morning he called me up and said he thought I should stay, and overnight I had had some doubts because of the fact that I had a number of engagements in New York and my trip to Paris had been publicized and I was supposed to be leaving on the ship and I would have to invent some excuse, but I said I would try and do it. In the meantime, I talked with the Secretary of State, who also shared my doubts - he said he thought it might be better for me to get over to France than I might be more useful there than I would be here. So the President then called me back, after talking to Rusk, and said that he thought, reluctantly, he was kind enough to say, that I'd better go on to my post in Paris. Then there was one curious incident later on, as I was leaving the airport in Washington the next morning about 10:00, checked in on the plane, and I was paged--there was a call from Kenny O'Donnell from the White House saying the President wanted me to be at this meeting at 11:00. I sent back word that I was on my way to New York, that I had engagement there and it would be very difficult to change it., and the word came back from O'Donnell

that the President regretted this very much but must insist that I come. So then I said please let me talk to the President and when I got the President, I explained that I was speaking at a luncheon of Franc-Amerique Association in New York that day and that it would be very difficult for me to get out of it; in fact, I remember saying I'd have to go out of here and break a leg on the station platform , and the President then said well you'd better go ahead and do it. At that point, I lost touch with the situation - I wrote a memorandum in longhand, however, which I gave to Dean Rusk which he told me he had read to the President and which the President afterwards mentioned , which ~~womanly~~ merely said that the main purpose in this thing is to get these bases removed and that, if necessary, we would do it by military means but, if possible, we should try by political and diplomatic means, I said I thought there was at least a chance that the Russians would take them out if we put up the corresponding force and our willingness to use it if necessary and as I recall I also recommended to re-think out the possibility of using an approach to Castro directly in a sort of ultimatic form as well as one to Khruschev. I knew that the President was going to speak on the following Monday night but I did not know which one of the variants which were before him he would choose, so I had to sit an uneasy two-three days on the ship.

S: Had the demand for a strike gotten much of a momentum ...

A: No - it had begun yes, and certain of the people had talked about the idea of an air strike but even then before I left and this was still in full discussion it seemed to me that

this would not be accepted because this would involve the killing of a lot of Russians and this is the kind of thinking that the Russians , with their primitive stance, would have probably reacted to and that you might might have pushed it over the edge into the inevitable war development - in other words, that the Russians might have felt bound to respond to that with some sort of military aggression which would have escalated up the line. But certainly from the manner in which the President handled that crisis, I would say with the admiration of the entire free world, and I think this did more than anything else to sort of prove the President to the world than any other single event of his administration because it was not only the combination of the firmness and calmness and reason which was employed in that--that he didn't take any step which would have automatically precipitated it into a war and he left no loopholes or weakness whereby he could have been bamboozled, as it were, by the Russians.

Do you believe that Cuba was the great turning point and that in a sense,.....

Yes, I think it is and although I thought a great deal about the thing I have come up with no clear answer as to why Khruschev thought he could get away with putting these missiles into Cuba. It was obvious what he intended to do with them, once he had them in there--they would be an enormous pressure weapon against the United States and we would undoubtedly have come to New York in November, there were clear indications he was planning to come to the United Nations and confront the United States in effect with the virtual ultimatum in regard to Berlin.

using those missiles in Cuba for that purpose. But why he thought he could get away with it I think remains at the moment a mystery. It's conceivable that he thought we would fool around, take it to the UN, then become legalistic about it, meantime he would go forward with his constructions and have them there but still this is a little unlike normal Russian behaviour and I'm frank to admit that I was one of those, before the event, the summer before who did not feel that the Russians would take the risk of putting offensive weapons in Cuba. Now I'm coming to the end of this talk, Arthur, and I'd just like to say a few words about the general impressions of Kennedy as a man and as a President. It's not easy to define, because there was a certain intangible quality about him, I've already mentioned the extraordinary clarity, unbiased nature of his intelligence and then, of course, there was the extraordinary charm of his personality, the flash of his wit, he had what the French call esprit, which is spirit if you will, but meaning a little more than spirit--it's more of an intellectual quality than just a spiritual one; and, if we can say with whoever said it, l'style cest l'homme (?)

I think that Kennedy's style, the imprint he left on anything he did and on any audience that he saw - as I said, the flashes of wit which were sort of dead-pan but really with a great deal of style which was very much his own. In effect, I think that the people of the world, including the people around him, and I think de Gaulle felt this too parenthetically, but that Kennedy was essentially a twentieth century man - he was